

1898

EFFECTIVENESS OF TURTLE TACKLE

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mainly the carapace and the longer bones from the flippers of the larger specimens are preserved entire for other uses, and are cleaned only by tooth and talons and tongues, aided by time but not by fire; but the plastron, unless broken up and consumed immediately, is subjected to a cooking process in which it serves at once as skillet and outlet—it is laid on the fire, flesh side up, and at intervals the shriveling tissues are clawed off and devoured, while at last the scorched or charred scutes themselves are carried away to be eaten at leisure.²³⁷

Perhaps the most significant fact connected with the Seri turtle-fishing is the excellent adaptation of means to ends. The graceful and effective balsa is in large measure an appurtenance of the industry; the harpoon is hardly heavier and is much simpler than a trout-fishing tackle, yet serves for the certain capture of a 200-pound turtle; and the art of fishing for a quarry so shy and elusive that Caucasians may spend weeks on the shores without seeing a specimen is reduced to a perfection even transcending that of such artifacts as the light harpoon and fragile olla. Hardly less significant is the nonuse of that nearly universal implement, the knife, in every stage of the taking and consumption of the characteristic tribal prey; for it may fairly be inferred that the comparative inutility of the knife in discovering the hard and horny chelonian derm, and the comparative effectiveness of the hell-breaking and bone-crushing hupf, have reacted cumulatively on the instincts of the tribe to retard the adoption of cutting devices. Of much significance, too, is the limited cooking process; for the habitual consumption of raw flesh betokens a fireless ancestry at no remote stage, while the crude cooking of (and in) that portion of the shell not consecrated to other uses might well form the germ of broiling or boiling on the one hand and of culinary utensils on the other hand. On the whole, the Seri turtle industry indicates a delicate adjustment of both vital and activital processes to a distinctive environment, in which the abundant chelonian fauna ranks as a prime factor.²⁵²

Analogy with other primitive peoples would indicate that the flesh of the turtle is probably tabu to the Turtle clan, that the consumption of the quarry is preceded by an oblation, and that there are seasonal or other ceremonial rites connected with turtle-fishing; but no information has been obtained on any of these points save a few vague and unwilling suggestions from Mashém tending to establish the analogy.

Plutonium and stolen metal have played a rôle in the industries of Beriland so long that it is difficult to learn much of the turtle fishing⁷⁴⁰

¹These details were furnished largely by Mashém and Sôher Kaulan, but were verified in considerable by personal observation of dietic conditions at Costa Rica in 1898, and they were corroborated by observations on both shores of El Esteroillo and Bahía Kaulan in 1898. Especially significant were the remnants of a turtle feast on the northern beach of Puente Miguel interrupted by the approach of the exploring party. The indications were clear that the turtle had been landed and largely consumed before the fire was kindled, and that the cooking of the former portions had hardly been commenced before the camp was abandoned or hurriedly that not only the nearly eaten turtle and the glowing embers, but the harpoon (the specimen illustrated in figure 50), the still bloody and greasy hupf (that represented in plate LVII), and the fire-sticks were left behind. General fragments of charred plastron are common relics about hastily abandoned camps generally.⁷⁴¹